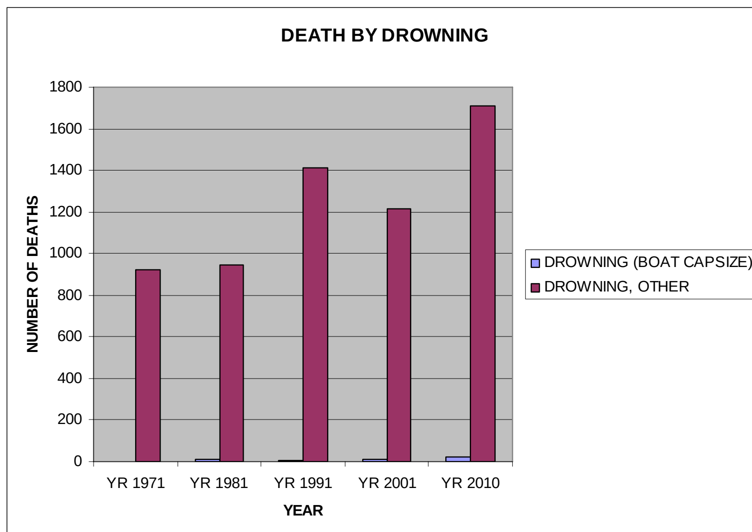
Another Summer of Drowning

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Yet another bout of summer holidays is coming up in Kerala and my memories go back to my childhood. We used to look forward to finishing of exams and arrival of the two long months when it was time out for books. Summer holidays was the time for collecting cashew nuts, to buy crackers for 'vishu', to play under the mango trees waiting for the mangos to fall and take our animals to the farm for grazing. While I know these pleasures will simply not return again in one's life, I still remember them nostalgically.

However, ever since I started tracking the safety trends in Kerala, I wait for the summer holidays with great apprehension. I know that every year dozens of children on holidays from the school will drown to death. Summer holidays thus becomes a sad memory for their families and friends. It frustrates me because I know there is no institution in Kerala which is keeping an eye on this and yet each of these deaths is so preventable.



I lost one of my friends to drowning during one such season. College was off and he went to the nearby pond to learn swimming. When his grandmother went to check, all that she could see was two coconuts connected with a plastic wire. That was his floating aid and he was practicing alone. As a safety expert, now I know how inappropriate that was. But I myself learned to swim by floating a banana stem, sometimes with and otherwise without supervision. The fact that I am here to tell you the story is more due to good luck than better techniques.

As per the records of the national crime records bureau, more than 1700 people die every year in Kerala due to drowning, one of the highest per population in India. That is close to five drowning deaths per day, a majority of them being are children and students. In spite of this, there is no coordinated effort to arrest this trend. What also bothers me is that there are major misconceptions about drowning deaths even among experts and those who are responsible to deal with it.

A significant amount of public attention and Government effort is focused on ensuring that all boats at tourist locations have life jackets. This is consequent to some major tragedies with multiple casualties that have taken place earlier. All boats, not just at tourist places and not just motor boats, should have life jackets and life buoys available. However, it is also important to know that all those combined efforts will still not bring down the death toll significantly. In 2011, only 21 people died due to capsizing of boats. Over the past 40 years, the average number of people who have died in boat accidents is less than 2% of the total drowning deaths. So while the attention to life jackets is important, the focus is not going to solve the scale of the problem.



Yet another initiative from the Government can be to teach swimming to students. This is also a good idea and in fact should be made mandatory for all children, male and female, before the age of 10 years. We should massively expand the availability of swimming facilities and instructors to achieve this. However, we should remember that teaching swimming also has its limits when it comes to preventing drowning deaths. A significant number of the children who die are below the age of 6 and many of them die in small drainage ponds outside the house or a bucket of water inside the flat. The fact that children have learnt to swim in a swimming pool will not help them in dealing with water safety risks in flowing rivers, muddy ponds or choppy seas. What we really need is increased awareness of safety in all risky situations involving water. All situations where young children and infants get access to even a bucket of water should be prevented at all costs. Children playing in ponds, rivers and seas should always be supervised by adults who know how to swim and have access to rescue devices.



Every year a number of children in Kerala get bravery awards and a majority of them are for rescuing others from the water in a heroic manner. While efforts to congratulate students who rescue others may be the right thing to do, from a professional safety point of view, this is not appropriate. The recommendation of the World Health Organization on rescuing people from water is “throw, don't go”, implying one should try to extend a rope, stick or any other device to help those in trouble. Children, who are not physically strong and professionally trained to rescue those drowning in water, should not attempt to jump in and save others as this means putting their own life to risk. Many of the multiple casualty reports that we hear, including deaths of up to 5 children at a time, results from such unprofessional rescue attempts with one student or more trying to rescue one drowning classmate. What children should be taught is to be aware of the dangers of water, the need to be prepared with rescue devices before entering water and the need to have adult supervision at all times. When we have all these of the above, there will be no more need to be heroic and there will be no more multiple deaths from rescue efforts.

As a child, I used to wait for many days till the monsoon filled our ponds with water. All of us, friends and family, then went to the ponds and streams for taking bath and playing. Some of my best memories are related to our time in the water. So it is not my case that children should be kept away from water. On the contrary, we should encourage them to take to water, train them to swim as early as one can, yet teach them about water safety even earlier and keep them under supervision at all times.



I hope this summer, all the children will return from their holidays and there will be no empty seats in any classrooms in Kerala. I also hope there will be no emptiness in any families too.

Few Tips for Preventing Drowning of Students

1. Teach children water safety as early as you can. Water, unlike fire, does not give early warning for children and is therefore deceptive. Tell children that there is NO safe water, be it pond, river or sea. One should always be careful and under supervision when entering water.
2. Whoever have possibility, give swimming lessons to children, both boys and girls
3. Take extra care in case of children who have conditions which aggravate the risk in water (epilepsy, muscle pull, some heart diseases) and also inform the children, their friends and others who may have to supervise him to be extra vigilant.
4. Tell children not to go for fishing, bathing or playing in water bodies when they visit their relatives, unless there is an adult member joining in.
5. When going to water, ask children to ensure that not only are they supervised but also have access to some floating device which can be thrown into the water if somebody gets into trouble. Even an improvised device of an inflated two wheeler tyre attached to a plastic rope can save lives.
6. Advise children NEVER to jump into water to save another person. Extend a stick, rope or even clothes to pull them out. If one does not have access to any of these, then shout for adult help.
7. Tell girls that their dressing will be a major hurdle to free movement in water increasing the risk. Girls not wearing swimming clothes are at additional risk while entering water.
8. Don’t jump or dive into water bodies. The water may be shallow or deep, you may get caught in mud, hit your head on rocks or sticks. Always enter slowly, feeling the depth ahead of you.
9. While in sea or in flowing waters as in a river, you could still drown in the shallow waters if you lose control.
10. Most of the floating devices available in market, such as rings, cuff floats, are not tested for safety. Use them as accessories but not as guarantees of safety.
11. One should never go to play in the water after dark, including in swimming pools if they are not well lit.
12. One should never enter water when unwell, after taking medicines causing drowsiness or after consuming alcohol.
13. Don't go to isolated beaches, rivers or ponds for swimming or fishing.

